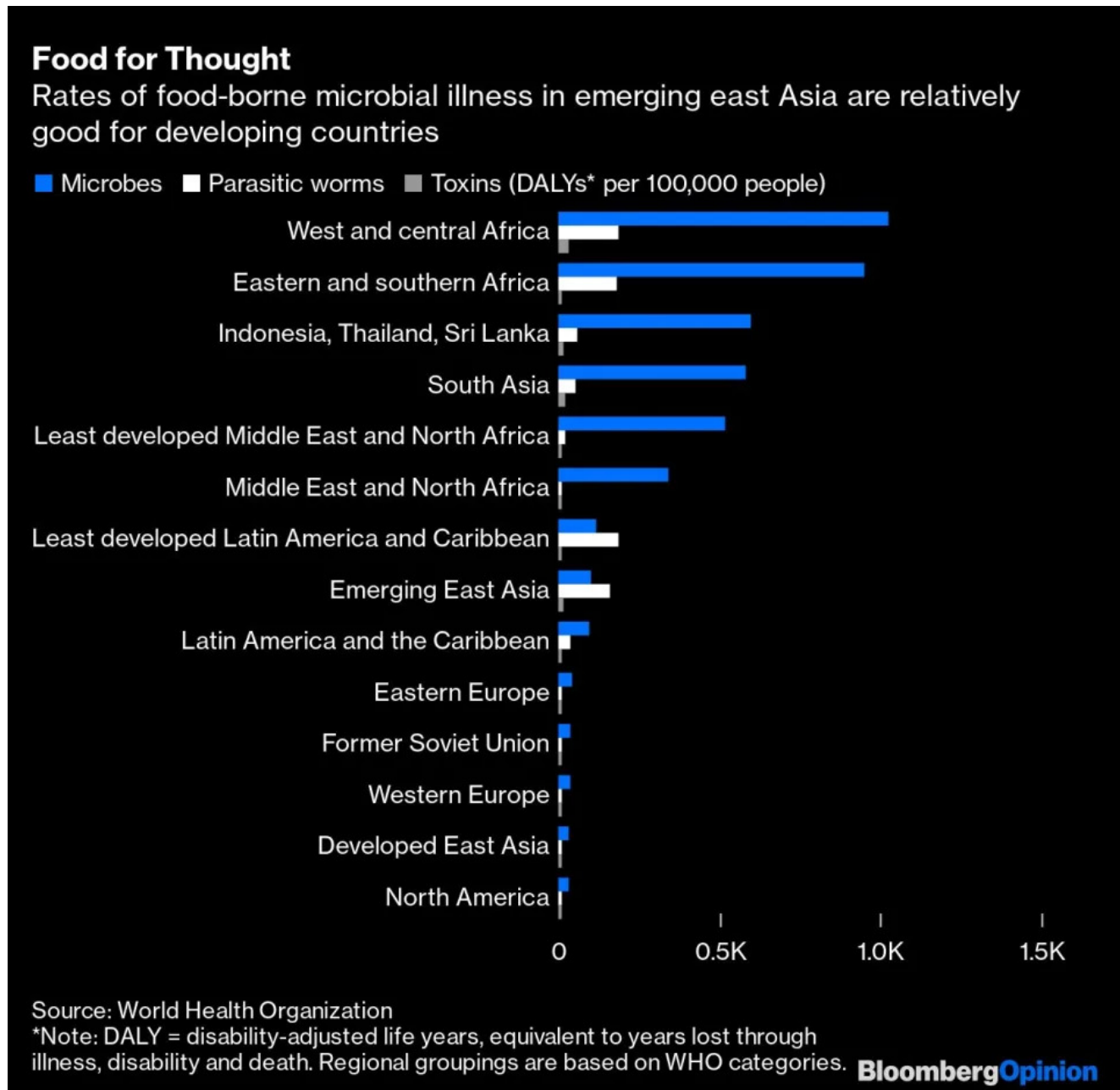


China Is Reopening Its Wet Markets. That's Good

finance.yahoo.com/news/china-reopening-wet-markets-thats-000050944.html

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(Bloomberg Opinion) -- Here's one more issue to add to the bonfire of tensions with China brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. The country is reportedly reopening its wet markets, the fresh produce stalls associated with Covid-19's early spread in Wuhan.

It's understandable that countries now in the grip of the first wave of infection might be outraged. Many blame wet markets for starting the outbreak in the first place. Opening them again, at a moment when thousands are dying overseas, seems emblematic of Beijing's increasingly chauvinistic approach to world affairs.

Animals in wet markets are penned and slaughtered or sold live right next to stalls selling fruit and vegetables. Conditions, as my colleague Adam Minter has written, are often less than hygienic.

Places where a range of common and exotic animals mix together while bodily fluids flow freely may seem a fertile breeding ground for the virulent novel diseases that cross the species barrier to humans and occasionally become pandemics.

At the same time, let's put the outrage on pause. Wet markets are increasingly losing ground to supermarkets in China. If they're showing resilience as suppliers of fresh goods, it's precisely because consumers regard them as a healthier and more sustainable alternative.

That perception isn't inaccurate. The prevalence of food-borne microbial illness in developing East Asia suggests that far from being cesspits of disease, wet markets do a good job of providing households with clean, fresh produce. And while the origins of coronavirus remain obscure, they may have at least as much to do with more worldwide activities such as intensive farming as practices specific to Asia.

The attraction of wet markets isn't so different from that of farmers' markets in Western countries. In contrast to a supermarket model where multiple layers of retailers, wholesalers and logistics companies stand in between the consumer and the grower, wet markets offer a personal and direct connection between shopper, stallholder and farmer.

Consumers know the food is fresh because there's generally little refrigeration, so everything must be sold on the day. If in doubt, they can ask the stallholder what's in season and which produce is best at the moment. If they think one market looks unsanitary, they can choose to shop at another.

That helps explain how wet markets have managed to hold their own in spite of the growth of store-based retail in recent years. Supermarkets now account for about half of all grocery spending in China, up from about 36% in 1995, according to Euromonitor International. Add in convenience stores and the like and so-called modern grocery has about 68% of China's retail wallet, giving wet markets less than a third.

Still, that store-based spending is overwhelmingly concentrated in packaged, rather than fresh produce. Foreign retailers that once hoped to dominate China's staple goods sector such as Carrefour SA and Metro AG have struggled and sold out of local ventures — but wet markets are still going strong.

The evidence suggests this consumer loyalty isn't misplaced. One 2015 study for the World Health Organization compared the number of years of life lost per 100,000 people due to food-borne sickness, disability and death. The region encompassing the wet market zone from China and South Korea down through most of Southeast Asia has the best record for microbial infections outside the Americas, Europe and the rich countries of the Pacific Rim. (1)

What about Covid-19 itself, though? There's good evidence that the virus has genetic characteristics from another pathogen found in pangolins, an exotic mammal sometimes sold in Chinese markets. And it circulated extensively around one of Wuhan's seafood and meat markets last December, although the earliest infections don't seem to have been connected to the site.

Only a small minority of wet markets sell such exotica, though, so you can close down the wild animal trade without shutting the places where most Chinese people get their daily sustenance. And don't overlook the possibility that a key ingredient in Covid-19's genetic cocktail isn't wild game, but domesticated livestock. The high-density conditions on farms are far more conducive to cooking up novel diseases, as we've written — and even pangolins are farmed in China these days.

To the extent that the mix of the raw and the cooked in Asia's wet markets is a health problem, it can easily be mitigated by better building design (such as separating meat, vegetable and livestock areas and keeping markets fully enclosed), plus the sort of mandated cleaning regulations found in places like Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea. There's plenty to complain about in the way that China downplayed and hushed up the initial outbreak until it was all but inevitable it would become a worldwide pandemic. Closing all wet markets, though, isn't the solution.

(1) Indeed, the data suggest the problem with Asia's appetite for "warm meat" isn't that fresh-slaughtered produce is less healthy than the chilled meat from an abattoir, but that local preferences for undercooked meat and fish lead to unusually high burdens of tapeworms, flukes and other parasitic worms. That's not something different retail formats can solve.

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